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Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

This research paper examines the theme of slavery in the novel *Beloved* which is written by Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison in the Novel *Beloved* describes the horrors of slavery and depicts its aftermath on African Americans. In her novel *Beloved* Toni Morrison conveys her strong feelings about slavery. One of the major themes throughout the book is the impact that slavery has on the individual. Morrison utilizes the characters Mr. Garner and Schoolteacher to illustrate how slavery affects everyone in a different way. The story is perfect for all who did not experience nor could imagine how it was to be an African American in America. *Beloved* lends a gateway to understanding the trials and tribulations of the modern African American. The Novel has many things that occur that are very striking and most of which have to deal with the treatment of the African Americans. The book as a whole shows to what lengths African Americans were willing to go to avoid enslavement of themselves or their children. In the novel the most extreme case of someone avoiding enslavement comes from the main

character when she attempts to kill her children. The main character Sethe is not willing to let her children end up re-enslaved and would rather see them dead. I think from my point of view that Sethe was justified in her actions.

Beloved is the story of a young black woman's escape from slavery in the nineteenth century and the process of adjusting to a life of freedom. *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's fifth novel. Published in 1987 *Beloved* became a best seller and received the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *Beloved* is based on the story of the African-American slave Margaret Garner who escaped slavery in 1856 in Kentucky by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. A posse arrived to retrieve her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Sethe killed her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured. Slavery is a very harsh and horrible way to live, and living in chains and without freedom is not living as a human should. Slavery degraded African Americans from humans, to that of animals. They were not treated with any respect, or proper care. Even modern day criminals, those that have murdered large numbers of people are treated more humanly than the average slave ever was. The life that the children would have lived would have been one of complete servitude, they would have never known what it was like to live on their own and make their own decisions. The fact that the slaves were treated like animals and they were sold like cattle is well depicted in the book.

Slavery, the most painful part of African-American heritage is the main theme around which the novel is woven. The novel is the dehumanization of blacks as a slave and their movement from slavery to freedom is the central theme of the novel. It represents the past the whole unchangeable pain and loss of slavery. It explores the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. The novel is set after the Civil War and emancipation during the period of national history known as the reconstruction. Much of the characters' pain occurs as they reconstruct themselves their families and their communities after the devastation of slavery. They cannot put slavery behind them by a simple act of will. As the novel opens the

past literally haunts the present. *Beloved* deals with the life of a female slave Sethe who kills her own daughter called Beloved to rescue her from the ancient suffering of slavery. Sethe's is an act of mercy killing or it is an act performed by a mother out of concern for her own daughter and her community. To be black in a world governed by racism and sexism is to invite the wrath of gentiles against a Jesus like figure. The Christian imagery powerfully endorses the predicament of black women in a violent society.

Morrison demonstrates her keen awareness, concern and dedication to African people in America. In the beginning Sethe's home is rocked by Beloved's activities, limited at this point to poltergeist manifestations: - "124 were spiteful" (p.30) In the first part witness the arrival and departure of Paul D, Beloved's appearance in flesh and blood and the awful events in the woodshed related through the perceptions of a variety of protagonists. Although the narrative proceeds over the course of a year the body of the text relates the events of the past.

Part two starts with the phrase: '124' was blood (p.169). The house is roaring with the voices of the oppressed, the people of the broken necks of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons (p.181) This part contains interior monologue by Beloved, Sethe and Denver; and the later two's acceptance of Beloved's identity as daughter and sister. It ends with Paul D's impassioned questioning of Stamp Paid as to how much suffering he, as a black man, is expected to withstand. It reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother and voices the positions of daughters, grandmothers, fathers, male friends, neighbors, community and the mother herself. Sethe's actions are measured and weighed against numerous atrocities, destructions and possible responses to them. The text therefore deliberately centers on the historical fact that there were black women during slavery who suffocated their babies rather than allow them to be offered up to destruction by slavery.

Beloved is the living embodiment of Sethe's mother love and painful past of enslavement which she represents is never really destroyed. That past is allowed to dissolve into mythology

and history of the community. *Beloved* is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery on the power of memory and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also the story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who living on the edge of life and death have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive.

Morrison's portrayal of *Beloved* as a sensual woman with otherworldly era provides us an insight into the author's vision. Had it been possible for black Slave Woman like Sethe to live with her family with dignity and self-respect in the America of 1850s Sethe would not have committed this hideous crime which was the mutilation of Sethe's vibrant mother love. Morrison's use of supernatural and folk belief in Spirit and Living-dead confirms the fact that she draws on traditional African folklore and mysticism has an integral place in her work. Morrison's interest in mysticism and the supernatural is exhibited in her portrayal of *Beloved*. *Beloved* becomes the symbol by which African people are to measure the devastating effect of isolation. Isolation literally tears apart the family. *Beloved* succeeds in dividing 124 from the rest of the American community. Denver's isolation in life, 124's isolation in the community and *Beloved*'s isolation in death all serve to further divide the African community and as a consequence leave it vulnerable to the oppression and exploitation of the slave society. It is she who drives Howard and Burglar from home and separates Paul D, Sethe and Denver just when their three shadows hold hands and just when they erect bonds with the African community.

In *Beloved* gender oppression is not a visible problem that exists between African men and women but is one that exists within the context of an economic relationship between master and slave and race is only a later justification for the oppression of the African people. In *Beloved* Morrison shows that unity is the only way by which African people can survive. It is only when the African through self or forced isolation exists outside the collective that the struggle appears endless and the burden unbearable. Morrison in her novel reinforces her theme of one people, one struggle and one solution in several ways. First, she begins each chapter in

the novel in the present, and then returns to the past in order to bridge the gap between occurrences of the past and those of the present. Second, the beginnings are often structured in such a way that they seem more like middles thereby emphasizing the fact that oppression for the African exists as one uninterrupted continuum. Another skilful structural device that Morrison uses to reflect the unchanging status of African people is the repetition of key words, phrases or sentences. Morrison further shows that Africans all over the world are one people, having the same history and sharing the same plight since they are seen as one by those outside the African nation, no matter what their class status might be. Clearly, she wants African people to see themselves as one people, undivided by their class status.

The novel reiterates its theme of solidarity by simply reminding the reader chapter after chapter that collective struggle is the only practical way to alleviate the oppression African people have been experiencing. The ultimate solution of collective struggle to the problem of economic exploitation of the blacks in white America is offered invariably in terms of fictional art. What Morrison has worked out in *Beloved* is an extraordinarily effective Gothic blend of postmodern realism and romance as well as of racial and sexual politics. For the characters of the novel as well as the implied author, the scars of racial, sexual and class oppression are more horrible on the soul than those on the body. Sethe and Sula are both victims and victimizers. Sethe is the beloved slave who is remarked as an animal when Schoolteacher's odious nephew drink her breast milk while Schoolteacher remarks, writes down her reactions, using the ink that Sethe herself made. They then mark the experience on her body, whipping her and creating a chokeberry tree on her back. Sethe's mark limits her. It is the sign of her slavery, and with the return of *Beloved*, it traps her in 124 Bluestone. Sula, with her rose birthmark, is denied identity by her mother, and she murders a childhood friend, throwing him accidentally into the Ohio River. Yet Sula, in contrast to Sethe, claims absolute freedom, which is symbolized by her mark.

Most people associate slavery with shackles, chains, and back breaking work. What they do not realize is the impact of the psychological and emotional bondage of slavery. Through the memories and experiences of a wide variety of characters *Beloved* presents unflinchingly the unthinkable cruelty of slavery. In particular the novel explores how slavery dehumanizes slaves, treating them alternately as property and as animals. To a slave-owner like African-American slaves are less than human. Paul D's experience of having an iron bit in his mouth quite literally reduces him to the status of an animal. And Schoolteacher's nephews at one point hold Sethe down and steal her breast milk, treating her like a cow. Even seemingly "kind" slave-owners like Mr. and Mrs. Garner abuse their slaves and treat them as lesser beings. Slavery also breaks up family units: Sethe can hardly remember her own mother and, for slaves, this is the norm rather than an exception, as children are routinely sold off to work far away from their families.

Another important aspect of slavery in the novel is the fact that its effects are felt even after individuals find freedom. After Sethe and her family flee Sweet Home slavery haunts them in numerous ways whether through painful memories, literal scars or their former owner himself who finds Sethe and attempts to bring her and her children back to Sweet Home. Slavery is an institution that is so awful that Sethe kills her own baby and attempts to kill all her children and to save them from being dragged back into it. Through the haunting figure of Beloved and the memories that so many of the characters try and fail to hide from *Beloved* shows how the institutionalized practice of slavery has lasting consequences physical, psychological, and societal even after it ends.

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